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Quest to Belong

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Abstract

This paper describes some components of intercultural communication theory that individuals face in an attempt to discover where they belong. It addresses how individuals with disabilities try to decrease the negativity of their social identity. The author further deals with negative attitudes of prejudice through a discussion of language attitudes and intercultural marriages. The paper concludes with a section on the characteristics of true communities.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Language Attitudes, Disabilities, Relationships.

Stepping Out

The need to belong and be accepted is one of the most fundamental human desires. Most individuals experience the feeling of being a stranger; everyone has a desire to be accepted. The desire to belong leads individuals on a quest to discover their rightful place. Stepping out of one's comfort zone is the first leg of the journey. When pilgrims step out, they are challenged by new experiences, different customs, and strangers. Although each pilgrim's journey is unique, this paper will highlight the research illustrating some strategies to manage negative social identities, how some groups are stigmatized based on languages; followed by what researchers have to say about intercultural couples, and conclude with characteristics of the holy grail of the quest, a true community.

Going to Extremes: Dealing with Negative Social Identity

The pilgrimage to discover a social identity and how each person fit into the big picture is a challenge. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) point out research that illustrates two different dimensions of social identities: voluntary-involuntary and desirable and undesirable (p. 98). Utilizing Gudykunst and Kim's (2003) definitions of the dimensions of social identity, a disabled identity is both involuntary and undesirable. Therefore, individuals labeled by society as disabled face a greater challenge. A review of the literature uncovers strategies utilized to lessen the negative stigma of being identified as disabled.

The classification, disabled, encompasses a wide variety of abilities and challenges among individuals from every culture, race, and social class. Individuals classified as disabled are stigmatized and judged as people to be avoided (Farina, Sherman, & Allen, 1968). They are unlikely to be chosen as friends or colleagues among able-bodied individuals (Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, & Dornbusch, 1961). The research to improve communication originally focused on how the disabled individual can better communicate with non-disabled individuals. Goffman (1963) suggests that individuals with disabilities should share information about their disability in order to alleviate the uncertainty and anxiety of able-bodied individuals. Other researchers agree that able-bodied people feel uncomfortable and lack adequate communication skills (Richardson et al., 1961). The lack of positive communication and interaction between disabled and non-disabled people leaves individuals with disabilities viewing themselves as incomplete, vulnerable, unfit, and needing rehabilitation (Mutua, 2001; Watermayer, 2009).

Other research points out that able-bodied behavior lead to fewer social and interpersonal opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Braithwaite, Emry, & Wiseman, 1984). This lack of social experience leads to low self-esteem and poor future outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

The difficulty of communication between disabled and non-disabled people has not improved since Goffman's original study. Thirty years after Goffman's suggestion, researchers still found able-bodied individuals to be full of anxiety and uncertainty in regards to communication with visibly disabled individuals; leading individuals with disabilities to search for solutions to improve the negativity (Grove & Werkman, 1991). In an attempt to shift the focus off their disability individuals try to direct the attention to other positive aspects of their identity, for example, highlighting creativity by displaying their artwork. Human beings have multifaceted identities, but for individuals with disabilities, everything seems to revolve around the disability; individuals are not seen as having other characteristics.

Disability is socially constructed as a defining characteristic of an individual (Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000). The disabled desire to be seen as people first, not as an embodiment of their disability (Braithwaite, 1996). For example, para-athletes desire their athletic achievements to define their identity. The daily physical activity enhances their self-esteem and peer relationships. It also results in increased achievement, better overall health, and higher quality of life (US Paralympic Team, 2012).

Members of the deaf community utilize denial to shift focus. They proclaim they are a linguistic minority and believe the focus should be on an acceptance of manual communication instead of rehabilitating of hearing impairments (Burch, 2001). In fact, The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is adamant that they are not disabled and are angry that medical professionals encourage parents to place Cochlear implants in children (2000). The NAD believes that the medically invasive surgery is proof that medical professionals and society envision them as broken and needing to be fixed (2000). Cochlear implants are not the only medical intervention sought by individuals with disabilities. The need to feel accepted or have their children accepted drives some parents to seek medical intervention to cope with social problems (Parens, 2009).

Children with Down syndrome are quickly recognized by the common facial characteristics and quickly labeled "retarded" no matter the level of functioning leading some parents to seek facial reconstruction to eliminate the stigma (Katz, & Kravetz, 1989; Katz,

Kravetz, & Marks, 1997; Kravetz, Weller, Tennenbaum, Tzuriel, & Mintzker, 1992). As humans, we strive to make connections and find a place to belong. Sadly it is the need to belong guiding parents to surgically alter their children; but even changing appearance does not guarantee acceptance. Although research demonstrates that parents are pleased and more accepting of their child after facial reconstruction, there is no change in the social acceptance among general society (Katz et al., 1997).

A less invasive approach to acceptance is overcompensation. Some individuals with disabilities push themselves to overcome obstacles and be seen as survivors instead of unfit (Cook, 2001). Other individuals overcompensate by trying to succeed in academics on equal standing with non-disabled individuals (Stocker, 2001). Perhaps the least invasive path to social acceptance is to join other stigmatized individuals to form groups for support and solidarity (Mutua, 2001). The internet and social networks, like Facebook, have made the formation of social groups easier, allowing a sense of comfort while gaining interpersonal experiences.

The disabled identity is involuntary and undesirable due to the negative reactions of the unaffected majority. The review of the literature has demonstrated the word “disability” is deficit-based and places limitations on people identified as disabled (Valeras, 2010). Research further highlighted that the non-disabled majority has difficulty communicating with disabled due to discomfort, uncertainty, and anxiety. Individuals strive to rise above the negativity, utilizing the various strategies discussed. Though no perfect strategy was discovered during research, each strategy proved to have positive and negative aspects. One common thread among researchers points to the drive for better solutions to improve communication between disabled and non-disabled. Unfortunately, until society learns to accept and embrace differences strategies to improve communication will continue to be ineffective. The hope is that one day individuals with disabilities will be accepted for who they are and offered a status that observes their rights and privileges as citizens, and in a real sense preserves their human dignity.

Language Attitudes: Pride or Prejudice

Negative social identities are not the only forms of prejudice that a pilgrim will encounter during the journey. Some individuals discover that utilizing slang and uncommon dialects that are found in every language leads to persecution. George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* (1916) follows a Phonetics Professor, Henry Higgins, who undertakes teaching a common flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, how to be a proper lady by changing her dialect to proper English. The

premise is in order to change the flower girl's status or position in life, she must learn to speak properly. Research shows that this presumption still holds true in modern American culture.

Language attitudes and prejudice against individuals or groups who do not speak Mainstream U.S. English (MUSE) is very prevalent; the stronger the accent the higher the stigmatization (Rodriguez, Cargile, & Rich, 2004). Individuals whose accents are standard in the community tend to be highly rated on traits related to competence, intelligence, and social status leading to higher success (Cargile, 2000), leaving those who speak with nonstandard accents devalued and often placed in low status positions. Such is the case for speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Although AAVE has equal status to MUSE as a language, mainstream society believes it has no value in mainstream American culture (Birch, 1999). Like Eliza Doolittle, in order to benefit from social and economic opportunities in American society African Americans must overcome this language (Birch, 1999; Shaw 1916).

Mexican-Americans also face challenges and economic disparities based on their language. Anti-immigration laws currently in debate across America are an attack on all individuals of Mexican ancestry and point to the level of prejudice in the country. Whether an individual is Mexican-American or a recent immigrant, their acceptance by dominant society is difficult due to their physical, cultural, and linguistic differences from the Anglo norm (Johnson, 1997). The prejudicial view is so strong that native born Mexican Americans are sometimes treated as foreigners or strangers when communicating in mainstream society regardless of language utilized. Some Latinos believe that to be fully accepted, they must shed all aspects of identity and ignore their culture, in a sense become "white" (Johnson, 1997). The emotional damage and strain must be great to daily worry if today someone will discover one is an Anglo-imposter (Johnson, 1997).

Like African and Mexican-Americans, the deaf community also faces severe prejudice or audism, the mentality that to be able to hear and to speak is necessarily better and leads to a higher quality of life (Lane, 2002). This is evident by the historical emphasis on oral education for deaf children and the resistance to early exposure to American Sign Language (ASL). Sign Languages are complete languages with their own grammar and syntax (Bishop & Hicks, 2005). The deaf community has several behavioral and language distinctions which are different from mainstream English. For example, deaf individuals maintain eye contact for an extended amount of time, making mainstream society uncomfortable (Lane, 1984). Uneasiness is caused by

hearing individuals not understanding that facial expressions play a grammatical and affective role in communication (Lane, 1984). Many in the deaf community believe that it is society that has the problem. They do not envision themselves as disabled; to them they simply function with a different form of communication.

Fluency in English is regarded as a marker of American Identity; therefore, citizens who refuse to give up their language cast doubt on their allegiance to the United States (Ramirez, 2006). It is this idea that fuels the prejudice against other languages utilized by various groups in America; leading to tough decisions by those group members. For instance, Malcom X believed that speaking “jive” was a sign of authentic blackness, but a black man speaking Standard American English was an Uncle Tom and had sold out to white middle-class America (Malcom X & Haley, 1965). Some researchers suggest there is room for a compromise. Just as we wear different clothes for various occasions, jeans to hang out and suits for work, researchers suggest that languages can also serve different functions; Mainstream U.S. English for business, government and academia and cultural languages like AAVE for home and neighborhood (Birch, 1999). This differentiated approach could bridge the gap and begin the long road toward acceptance.

Language Status Planning is also a possible solution. A status plan must have a goal, research plan, and method of diffusion (Cooper, 1989). Even with a plan, changing attitudes toward a language is extremely difficult to accomplish. Cooper (1989) suggests that a grassroots approach aided by experts, academicians, and authorities is the best chance for success. Support from the upper and middle class Americans within the particular language group is also necessary. For example, Oakland Unified school board mandated that the district devise and implement a plan for educating African American students in their primary language, AAVE (Oakland School Board, 1998). This resolution was hotly debated, in part due to U.S. Secretary of Education assuring the American public that federal government funds would not be utilized, and lack of support by key African American figures like actor Bill Cosby and author Maya Angelou (Jackson, 1997).

The fact is that everyone is judged by the way they speak, and many people of all social classes and ethnicities face prejudice because of their dialects and accents. Southerners slow drawl classifies them as “incompetent rednecks,” and individuals with Italian accents are thought to be mobsters. Some Americans believe that in order to succeed, proper mainstream U.S.

English should be spoken, therefore, disparities in social class, career choices, and income are justified. Many have forgotten that America was populated by immigrants speaking many languages and dialects with the belief that all men are created equal. Unfortunately, for many Americans that speak using languages of their culture, America is not the great melting pot, but a harsh reality of rejection (Johnson, 1997). A remembrance of our diverse heritage is needed; hoping that remembrance brings acceptance and equality for all.

Love Regardless: Intercultural couples

Some pilgrims discover love among other cultures and races. These intercultural couples often must choose to give up family, friends, and community for the sake of love. Families and communities often refuse to support an interethnic marriage due to fear of cultural dilutions (Inman, Altman, Kaduvettoor-Davidson, Carr & Walker, 2011). Research further demonstrates that due to the historical hostility and degree of separation between blacks and whites, the level of sanctions directed at their marriages are more powerful than marriages between whites and other non-black racial minorities (Yancey, 2007). For instance, Arkansas had specific laws from 1837-1968 which outlawed marriages between blacks and whites specifically, but no other racial minorities were included (Robinson, 2001). Regardless of the challenges, many interethnic couples choose to take the plunge into marriage.

Marrying interethnically involves integrating multiple cultures while having to face great scrutiny from the primary communities. In collective societies, marrying is a communal affair, so parents are concerned how this coupling may impacted their perceived image within the community (Inman et al., 2011). For example, an Asian Indian bride that comes from an affluent family marrying a blue collar worker from a middle class family might turn heads among the bride's community. Collectivist-individualistic orientations can also be seen in familial orientation. Collectivist parents are viewed as higher maintenance than individualistic western parents. For example, Filial Piety in many Asian cultures expects that respectful, obedient children will be the main source of financial security during the parents golden years (Rosenblatt & Steward, 2004). This is a major adjustment for Anglo-Saxon spouses that expect their parents to set aside the needed funds required for their retirement. Despite the differences and early scrutiny, according to research most families come around to accept and support the couple (George & Yancey, 2004).

Cultural similarities and differences are also seen in the area of values among interethnic couples. Similarities include importance of education, openness to diversity, and strong family ties (Inman et al., 2011). Differences include importance of extended family, notions of privacy, gender roles, and food (Inman et al., 2011). The importance of extended family in Asian cultures has been previously addressed, but Hispanic and African cultures also place a high value on extended family relationships. For instance, many of these cultures practice multigenerational living, having several generations living together and sharing expenses. The cultural differences noted in the desire for privacy among couples causes conflict due to the variance of information shared; typical westernized parents maintain a respectful distance, but collectivist cultures like Asian Indian family members share every minute detail (Inman et al., 2011).

Intercultural couples also have different gender roles and expectations. Many westernized women are no longer satisfied raising children, cooking and cleaning; they want it all: the career, children, and husband. The desire for women to have a career and family creates conflict for typical male-dominated cultures including Persian, Greek, and Mexican societies as well as Anglo-Saxon traditionalists who expect woman to stay home, nurture the children, and maintain the household (Bustamante, Nelson, Henriksen, Jr, & Monakes, 2011). Traditionalists believe that the woman's place is in the home and the thought of women in the workforce erects disharmony.

Along with gender role expectations, traditions regarding sexual intercourse also create challenges when crossing cultural lines. For example, traditional Korean culture places a high value on virgin brides leading to issues for Korean American women who date Caucasian men with a more permissive view of sex. Korean families suffer shame and dishonor if pre-marital sex resulted in pregnancy outside of wedlock; this variance leaves a young lady choosing between family expectations and pleasing her boyfriend (Greenberg, Bruess, & Haffner, 2000). Another example comes from Russia where abortion is viewed as a legitimate form of birth control, conflicting with pro-life views in America (Caron, 1998).

Religion among intercultural couples can be difficult to manage. When couples are raised in different religious traditions, these practices may influence many aspects of family life such as holiday traditions, food, gender roles, sexuality and child-rearing (Wiggins-Frame, 2004). Couples have several options to manage religious differences. Some couples choose to practice their religions independently. Others solve the issue by converting to the spouse's religious

practice (Wiggins-Frame, 2004). While these choices often work for a time, the major conflict typically occurs after children come into the picture. For example, couples must answer questions such as “which religious holiday will be observed?”, “Will male children be circumcised?”, and “Will children be baptized?” These issues may cause couples to find a totally different religion that meet both needs, abandon formal religion all together, or combine experiences to create new family traditions for the household.

Most individuals depend on their personal experiences from childhood to guide them in how to raise their own children (Perel, 2000). Couples with different cultural background often discover their ideas in regards to child rearing are very different. For example, Iranians believe that the father should discipline children, particularly sons, with an iron fist, but many Anglo-Americans lean toward a more permissive, communicative style of parenting; these difference lead to conflict and strife in the family (Wiggins-Frame, 2004).

Language barriers are unique issues for couples who marry across cultures. Misunderstandings often occur due to differences among high and low context messages utilized in various cultures (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). High context cultures that do not say what they mean lead to confusion for spouses who come from low context cultures that speak directly. Language issues can also lead to self-worth and self-esteem issues for the new language learner. He or she often feels like a child and not being fully heard or respected due to lack of fluency in the language (Rosenblatt & Steward, 2004).

Population projections suggest that by the middle of the twenty-first century the Caucasian population share will fall below 50%, while Hispanic and Asian American populations will continue to grow especially rapidly (Hummer & Hamilton, 2010). These shifts in population shares will lead to more interethnic marriages.

Community Characteristics

Some pilgrims will find the journey too long and settle for anyplace, but others will strive to reach the perfect fit, a place with others who share commonalities to satisfy their need to belong (Gudykunst, & Kim, 2003); a place where they can experience safety, inclusion, and acceptance, and where they do not have to constantly justify or explain our actions. This is in stark contrast to how individuals relate with people of dissimilar groups, where they have to be on the alert and have to explain or defend their actions with more effort (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Although all communities are different, theses seven common characteristics, inclusivity,

commitment, consensus, contemplation, safe place, vulnerability, and graceful fighting ,help pilgrims identify if they have indeed discovered their holy grail (Gudykunst, & Kim, 2003).

The first characteristic of community is inclusivity (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Peck (1987) believes that exclusivity is the enemy of community; believing that it takes variety to form a community. McMillian and Chavis (1986) on the other hand, believe that in order to belong to something, it must be possible to not belong, therefore, boundaries must exist. They see boundaries as a benefit to clarify communities; a way of protecting individual's rights of freedom of association (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). It is not to say that boundaries cannot co-exist with inclusiveness, or that equality means sameness; it is the idea that boundaries serve to articulate the sense of community (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). Other researchers believe that it takes practicing inclusion skills, not creating boundaries to clarify communities. Opatow (1990a, 1990b) believes that those skills are: 1. The belief that considerations of fairness apply to all other identity groups. 2. The willingness to redistribute economic and social resources to the underprivileged. 3. The willingness to make sacrifices to foster another's well-being. Opatow's approach directs individuals toward a tribal or village perspective in order to achieve inclusiveness among members. Regardless of the path a community chooses to follow the ultimate goal is the destruction of exclusivity.

A commitment to exist together regardless of the struggle is another characteristic of community. Kristen Hunter (2003) said, "First it is necessary to stand on your own two feet. But the minute a man finds himself in that position, the next thing he should do is reach out his arms." In other words, each individual must strive to be strong and self-sufficient, but in a true community, each understands the commitment of accepting differences and moving on. It has been said that the group is only as strong as the weakest link. The benefit of a true community working together is that when one succeeds all experience success. We should never underestimate the power of thoughtful, committed people, for they can change the world.

The ability to reach consensus among members is the third characteristic of community (Peck, 1987). In order to discover a consensus, differences must be confronted and discussed, not ignored (Peck, 1987). Community becomes highly developed when individuals learn to celebrate and appreciate differences instead of hiding, denying, or obliterating them. Community members take the time to address conflict and confusion, in order to reach a mutually beneficial agreement of the governing rules.

Members of a community practice reflection. It is important that the different segments of the community perceive their identities and interrelationships and contemplate their world to discover compatibility among the various components of their community. This thoughtful reflection of ourselves and how we fit into the big picture allows us to work with other members of our community, to create a shared vision, which engages the community in the pursuit of a common goal that transcends the individuals (Jason, 1997).

According to Maslow (1943), after meeting physiological needs in order to survive humans seek safety. This desire leads to Peck's (1987) fifth characteristic of community, a safe place. Society ordinarily makes its members feel safe enough from wild animals, extremes of temperature, criminals, and assault to eliminate safety needs as an active motivator (Maslow, 1943), but a feeling of complete safety eludes most of society (Peck, 1987). Members in communities feel safe due to the acceptance of other members, allowing them to speak openly and freely (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

Safety in a community allows members to be vulnerable. (Peck, 1987). To develop a true community, members must be willing to show their authentic selves, and live a life exposing true self without a mask. True community will develop when we risk exposing our intimate side to others and be affected by others who share their inner selves to us (Peck, 1987).

The final characteristic of communities is graceful fighting (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Anytime there are groups of people living together, sharing experiences, and space, conflict is sure to arise. Graceful fighting in communities seeks to acknowledge questions arising from differences and to "put them to good use within the community" (Wiesenfeld, 1996). Conversely, if questioning remains unresolved then decay of the community will follow (Peck, 1987). Therefore, in order to preserve community, members must learn to effectively communicate through the questions in order to resolve the conflict. Research shows that conflict can be productive and move a community forward when all participants are satisfied and think they have gained as a result of the conflict (Abigail & Cahn, 2011).

Human beings are social creatures. Communities serve as a safety net in which individuals seek to satisfy their needs for identity, inclusion, boundary regulation, adaptation, and communication coordination (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Although communities can differ in their purpose, true communities share common traits. Each of these characteristics work together, to build a true community where a group of individuals can communicate honestly with

each other, live authentic lives together, and shed superficial masks. They have made commitments to rejoice and mourn together, to delight in each other, and reach out to share challenges (Peck, 1987).

End of the Quest?

The quest to belong contains many different challenges that pilgrims must face and overcome. Some face challenges of involuntary and undesirable social identities; they make extreme choices in an attempt to slay the negative label. Others contend with prejudice based on the language they use to communicate. Some find love in unexpected and often unacceptable places, but choose to love regardless. Each pilgrim has his or her own obstacles, but all have a desire to belong. The quest is long, and discovery of true community seems a mirage. There are those who will create settlements, places to just survive; but for some the quest will not end until the discovery of the holy grail.

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